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## **I've got your back: Danger, volunteering and solidarity in lifeboat crews**

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### **Abstract**

This article considers solidarity as a dynamic interrelationship between intersubjective and structural processes that underpin webs of meaning in dangerous work conditions. Conceptual links are developed to integrate previously unconnected aspects of work and relationships between danger, volunteering, edgework and solidarity - revealing how a distinct form of solidarity is engendered and experienced. Drawing on 43 in-depth interviews with Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI) workers operating in the UK and Ireland (12 paid and 31 volunteers), the analysis illuminates experiences of solidarity in a dangerous working environment. Findings reveal that solidarity is constituted by the interplay between volunteering work practices, shared experiences of rescues, and the meaningful purpose of safeguarding human life. This empirical study provides a basis for theorising distinct conditions relating to solidarity as differentiated from previous work on the concept. Further implications are discussed for contexts where various forms of danger and solidarity might be experienced.

**Keywords** Dangerous work, edgework, meaningful work, solidarity, volunteering

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## Introduction

Investigating traditional and emerging forms of solidarity in work activity can help to understand better the processes underpinning webs of meaning and purpose in organisations, workplace cultures, labour markets and economies (Barabaschi, 2015; Wilde, 2007). Over the past fifty years, much solidarity literature has focused on identity politics, industrial relations, class struggle, inequalities, and ideological conflicts (e.g. Anner et al., 2006; Wilde, 2013). While appreciating the importance of this work, this article departs from more adversarial political and economic understandings of solidarity, and instead focuses on aspects of the meaningful bonds and relationships that interactively construct solidarity. Furthermore, by focusing on both the structural and the intersubjective aspects, the article considers the constitution and (re)production of solidarity, as well as how it can be codified, embedded in organisational structures, and practiced in dangerous voluntary work.

This article explores work at the Royal National Lifeboat Institution (RNLI), an organisation operating around British and Irish coasts since 1824 with the mission of saving lives at sea. The labour process of work in this voluntary organisation constitutes a dynamic interplay between structural and organic social conditions for fostering solidarity. Most notably, the seafaring work of the operational volunteers of the RNLI is both risky and dangerous. In the course of the institution's history over 600 volunteers have died in service (RNLI, 2018), equal only to fishing, forestry and agriculture as the most dangerous UK industry sectors by fatal and non-fatal injury rates (Health and Safety Executive, 2017).

Danger can evoke a range of social and individualistic responses, depending on who is affected and to what degree. The anthropologist Mary Douglas (1966/2003) writes that 'when the community is attacked from outside...the external danger fosters solidarity within' (2003:

141). However, the subjective, cultural aspects of dangerous work are often neglected relative to more technical, calculative discussions of risk and safety, which obscures nuance and variation with respect to socially constructed meanings (Lyng, 1990; McLain, 1995). When some grave threat, danger or risk faces a social group, or a disaster – such as a terrorist attack or shooting – has occurred, a social group will often try to organise itself, restore meaning and heal trauma by constructing bases of solidarity (e.g. Collins, 2004; Nurmi et al., 2012). In different circumstances, such as those framed by an ‘edgework’ perspective (Lyng, 1990), risk-taking is more explicitly voluntary and even routine, where collective actors construct solidarities around a preparedness to confront uncertainty with a sense of adventure (Roth, 2015). Additionally, risk-taking and danger may be unavoidable (e.g. rare crises or accidents), periodically necessary (e.g. inherent in particular occupations), or deliberately pursued (e.g. edgework).

This article considers collective voluntary engagement with dangerous, life-saving rescue work to explore how the nuances of such work help reveal a ‘situational understanding of the meaning systems at play’ (Fleming and Sturdy, 2011:183), specifically with regards to the forms of solidarity accomplished. This extends current studies of work and employment by demonstrating the complexities of volunteering work organisation and its subjective construction of solidarity through dangerous working conditions and shared values of mutual responsibility and safeguarding human lives.

This exploration of solidarity in relation to voluntary engagement offers valuable refinements into understanding its ongoing generation and (re)production. Following the call of Barley and Kunda (2001) to ‘bring work back in’, the current article emphasises the fine-grained, nuanced and experiential aspects of the work activity itself, as reproduced both formally and informally, or structurally and organically. This includes the formal work organisation practices that contract, prepare and equip volunteer crews for their work

operations, as well as intersubjective aspects of ‘what it’s like’ to experience danger and meaningfulness in voluntary work alongside others (Tomkins and Eatough, 2013).

Shifting the focus and emphasis of solidarity towards volunteering work, cooperation, mutual responsibility and resilient social bonds accomplished in the face of dangerous work makes three main contributions to the literature. First, discussions of volunteering work are extended by exploring how the lived experience and work organisation of social norms and obligations constructs and (re)produces a distinct form of solidarity among volunteers. Broadly similar contexts include charities, social enterprises, and self-organised, cooperative settings. Second, studying bonding in work activity that is simultaneously dangerous and voluntary extends understandings of how solidarity among workers can be accomplished under challenging conditions (e.g. Jermier et al., 1989; Somerville, 2005). Finally, exploring the social and organisational aspects of dangerous work as experienced in situ highlights how workers draw meaning from their work to inform and reinforce a sense of solidarity.

In carrying out these aims, the remainder of this article is organised as follows. First, literature relevant to meaningfulness in voluntary work, dangerous working environments, edgework and solidarity is reviewed, developing conceptual relationships between these previously unconnected phenomena. After describing study methods, the findings and discussion are presented, showing how volunteers construct and enact a distinct form of solidarity through the meanings they ascribe to the dangers of their work.

### **Solidarity and meaning in voluntary work**

In calling for more research into the concept, Wilde (2007: 171) defines solidarity as ‘the feeling of reciprocal sympathy and responsibility among members of a group which promotes mutual support’. Solidarity is often considered desirable or achievable in real-world affairs or

taken for granted as either present or absent without being elaborated further (Kapeller and Wolkenstein, 2013). However, solidarity is particularly salient to examining meaningfulness in social relationships because of the need to better theorise the various possible grounds or bases from which it might arise (Kapeller and Wolkenstein, 2013). In particular, recent developments in social theory argue that solidarity can take various ontological forms depending on the instrumental, emotional, contractual and group-based foundations for the development of social bonds and normative assumptions. For example, Kapeller and Wolkenstein (2013) distinguish between self-centred economic grounds for solidarity, such as an EU fund to finance projects in struggling economies, and more reflexive forms of solidarity, based on affective, interpersonal bonds of sympathy, empathy and mutual understanding with a particular group, such as the homeless or those living in poverty (see also Thijssen, 2012).

Volunteering work is one potential basis for a strong and distinctive form of enacted solidarity. Indeed, the act of volunteering is sometimes presented in sociological terms as a way of expressing and providing a role model for core societal principles such as solidarity, social cohesion and democracy (Wuthnow, 1998; Putnam, 2001). Some research on volunteering investigates how personal values and social relationships affect the experienced meaningfulness of voluntary work (e.g. Baines, 2004; Venter et al., 2017; Ward and Greene, 2018). However, these values and relationships of voluntary work are also institutionally embedded, where the material and structural aspects of work practices and conditions socialise volunteers to enter into more organic, particularistic work experiences where they will spontaneously show solidarity together (Bartram et al., 2017; Taylor, 2004). The current research aims to extend this work towards understanding solidarity as a doubly reinforced source of meaning in voluntary organisations, informed both structurally and organically by work organisation and interpersonal experiences, respectively.

Volunteering literature also argues and shows that strong bonding and socialisation enhance individuals' meaning and commitment to their volunteering groups and tasks (Haski-Leventhal and Cnaan, 2009). One example is Hustinx et al.'s (2008) study of volunteers for children's respite homes, which empirically establishes meaningful commitment and group bonds as central reasons why volunteers remain in demanding roles. How volunteers derive meaning from the clients/beneficiaries of their work is also significant. Identification and embeddedness within groups and supportive communities have important effects on the volunteering experience, and particularly so in instances of 'thick' forms of volunteering (O'Toole and Grey, 2016b), where dense webs of social relations lead to a highly committed, involved and meaningful form of volunteering. In sum, while volunteering arguably weakens some traditional work bonds associated with pay and career, it strengthens and expands connections with other domains of meaning and solidarity, such as community, family and institutional relations (Taylor, 2004).

The current research builds on and extends these studies by theorising voluntary engagements with dangerous work as a distinctive and powerful basis for building and showing solidarity, in terms of both formal work organisation and informal bonding experiences on the job. Additionally, volunteering work varies in the extent to which it is dangerous – physically and psychologically – and this seems likely to have powerful effects on the meaningfulness and construction of solidarity, particularly in situations where the risks of harm are high and high levels of interpersonal trust are required. Solidarity in these dangerous work situations is therefore considered further below.

### **Solidarity in dangerous work and edgework**

Solidarity appertains to social relationships based on varying degrees of reciprocity and joint action, ultimately concerning what people are prepared to do for one another in order to achieve meaningful objectives together (Kapeller and Wolkenstein, 2013; Sangiovanni, 2015). The collective activity involved in triumphing over danger together and preventing harm or loss of life is a very powerful example of solidarity. The exposure of workers to dangerous and harmful hazards has long been a key social, political and moral issue (Jermier et al., 1989). However, a substantive review of the literature on dangerous and extreme work contexts agrees that this disparate body of research is hugely fragmented (Hällgren et al., 2017). Relevant fields include risk management, health and safety and workplace well-being (Perrow, 1984; Cioni and Savioli, 2015). Danger can also feature intermittently in relation to dirty, precarious or stigmatised forms of work (Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Standing, 2016), and violence and bullying (Costas and Grey, 2018; Simpson and Cohen, 2004). In a special issue on the intensity and dangers of extreme forms of work, Granter and colleagues (2015) note the difficulties in defining such forms of work, but highlight the concurrent urgent need to engage with them, given the various stressors of many modern work settings.

Building on the work of Ross (1974), Jermier et al. (1989) and McLain (1995), dangerous work is defined here as *work activity which can routinely result in serious or significant physical harm and psychological trauma to the worker and others around them*. While all definitions of danger can take on a relative and subjective quality, the focus here is on a danger of death, serious injury and extreme psychological trauma. This would arguably need to be encountered relatively frequently, at least several times in a yearly period of work, to qualify as ‘routinely’ dangerous activity.

As well as the RNLI lifeboat rescue crews of the current study, other occupations and contexts that qualify as dangerous work under the current definition include mining, fishing, the armed forces, emergency services, humanitarian aid work and other forms of rescue work



(e.g. mountain rescue). Other work such as care work, social work, sex work and some heavy manufacturing work are perhaps more borderline due to there being slightly less extreme or routine physical danger and psychological trauma. Importantly, none of this is to deny that many other job roles may involve less routine or less extreme forms of danger that nevertheless have very serious implications for employment relationships and well-being.

More specifically in relation to danger and voluntary work activity, Jennifer Lois (1999, 2001, 2003) examines heroism in a voluntary mountain search and rescue group. Lois' work finds that members must regulate intense feelings that arise from physically and emotionally demanding tasks. Although acknowledging that levels of 'difficulty, danger, and stress' vary greatly among the search and rescue missions (Lois, 2001: 385), the analysis highlights the importance of a dangerous work context in structuring the norms, violations and sanctions of group membership. It is *because* the work environment poses such risk to life and limb that a long period of socialisation and training is necessary, and those with less physical strength (for example, women) find it difficult to become trusted and gain acceptance. Similarly, although studying paid firefighters rather than volunteers, Pratt and colleagues (2018) note that dangerous work requires socially meaningful 'leaps of faith' based on bonding and information-sharing, which support co-worker assessments of trust in each other and the team as a whole.

Stephen Lyng's concept of edgework is instructive regarding the *voluntary* aspects of facing danger (1990, 2005, 2008). Edgework is a social-theoretical perspective on uncertainty and risk, which places emphasis on the social value of voluntarily exploring dangerous edges and boundaries - between life and death, for example. Broadly, edgework can be applied to extreme sports and risky recreational activities as well as any use of skill to wrest control over a dangerous and disordered boundary (Lyng, 1990). Edgework is acknowledged as a way of conceptualising extreme work contexts (Hällgren et al., 2018), although remains

relatively under-explored in work settings. One notable exception is Granter et al.'s (2018) work on emergency ambulance crew, where edgework is deployed to capture the negotiation of boundaries between levels and forms of work intensity. Their study finds that while some dangers are experienced as meaningful and rewarding for participants, organisational pressures are experienced as negative and unnecessary. However, as paid public service work, ambulance work is not voluntary in the same way as work that is explicitly performed without pay by volunteers, as in the current study.

All dangerous work is voluntary in the sense that the worker 'chooses' that particular job, yet in the case of the RNLI, a meaningful web of social relations (Grey and O'Toole, 2018) can serve to shape individual choice in significant ways. More broadly, as is recognised in the volunteering literature (e.g. Pearce, 1993; Ward and Greene, 2018), the removal of the traditional wage-labour bargain has major consequences for the ways that volunteers are organised, managed, and experience meaning in their work (O'Toole and Grey, 2016a). While some dangerous work in existing research is voluntary and ad hoc, many operational lifeboat roles in the RNLI are highly distinctive. The work is unpaid, highly decentralised, hierarchically flat (beyond some limited core infrastructure and roles) and rooted in local communities and histories associated with various lifeboat stations.

The current study aims to explore this specific context of work that is *simultaneously* voluntary and dangerous, as it relates to the social construction of solidarity. Together, volunteering and facing danger, if framed as urgent and worthwhile, create a uniquely dynamic potential for generating a strong basis for solidarity. Volunteering represents a complex social and moral work context that sits in meaningful contrast to other private and public domains of employment and economy, in offering help and solidarity where it might not otherwise be provided (Butcher and Einolf, 2017). Furthermore, to the extent that risk and danger faced together are experienced differently to when faced alone, then working

collectively in a dangerous environment and voluntarily without pay should prompt meaning-making about the purpose of the work and the bonds needed to carry it out.

In sum, this raises the possibility of solidarity in terms of a sense of shared responsibility and a preparedness and willingness to help and cooperate – to 'show solidarity' in exchange with others. It suggests that solidarity can be achieved via unpaid work, in ways both similar to and distinct from existing literatures on dangerous public services work and dangerous recreational edgework activities (Granter et al., 2018; Lois, 1999; Lyng, 1990; Roth, 2015). Below, in the study setting of the RNLI, the conceptual linkages outlined above between dangerous work activities, volunteering and edgework are used as a framework to understand solidarity at the RNLI.

## **Methodology**

This study focuses on data collected from the RNLI, a charity which operates 341 lifeboats from 237 stations dotted around the coasts of the UK and Ireland. The RNLI depend on a network of over 31,000 volunteers, of which 4,600 are operational crew members who go to sea on search and rescue missions (RNLI About Us, 2016). In 2016 lifeboats launched 8,851 times, rescuing 8,643 people and saving 431 lives (RNLI Operational Statistics, 2017). The empirical data reported here draw from a larger study, with fieldwork conducted from 2010 to 2013.

The operating context of the organisation was deemed highly important, and so an in-depth case study design was considered appropriate. This allowed for research situations where 'the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident' (Yin, 2009: 23). The meaning systems in this social setting did not operate in isolation from the context in which the volunteers worked; they were unpaid workers in a dangerous environment. As

Siggelkow asserts: 'It is often desirable to choose a particular organization precisely because it is very special in the sense of allowing one to gain certain insights that other organizations would not be able to provide' (2007: 20).

The main method of data collection was 43 semi-structured interviews with individuals at all levels of the organisation. Of these, 12 were paid and 31 were volunteers. Ten of the paid respondents were directors, senior managers and managers of the RNLI, and two were employed mechanics at stations. 28 participants were operational, and a further three had at one point been operational but by the time of the research had exceeded the age limit of 65. Although women play an increasing role in the support functions of maintaining a working station (Hennessy, 2010), only around eight percent of crew are women. The RNLI is a highly gendered work setting, with many operational roles over-represented by men. Four women were interviewed in this study – two in managerial roles and two operational crew members. While gendered aspects of work solidarity merit further investigation more widely, the four women's responses were consistent with those of all the men studied and reported here, and so are not discussed further.

Where quotes are presented, pseudonyms, roles and the participants' tenure in years are given in brackets. Tenure is provided to emphasise that many of the volunteers have been in their roles a long time, reflecting the high average levels of tenure in general as well as some level of self-selection for those meeting the sustained demands of the work.

Interviews took a life-history approach, which encouraged the interviewees to elaborate on their own experiences (Tierney, 1998). Interviews lasted from fifteen minutes to three hours, with an average of fifty minutes per interview, and took place at local stations, in RNLI headquarters, the Lifeboat Training College and at one RNLI divisional base. All interviews were digitally audio recorded and transcribed verbatim.

Further data came from field trips. These included visits to lifeboat stations and central and divisional headquarters, as well as undertaking a work simulator exercise and sitting in on a five-day management communications and command training course for station management personnel. A research diary was used to record observations and after the transcription of interviews and writing up of the field notes and diary the primary data ran to 250,000 words of transcript. RNLI documentation including mission statements, vision statements, volunteer handbooks, codes of regulation and standard operating procedures were also consulted. This allowed for reflection on how the RNLI was institutionally embedded and codified as a voluntary work organisation, shaping solidarity in ways interrelated with more interpersonal, organic experiences of solidarity at sea.

The process of data analysis and emergence of themes was iterative and driven principally by the aim of exploring participants' own thinking and understanding of their experiences. Attention was paid to themes in the data, which were then aggregated and abstracted to emergent categories, and then clusters. The overall goal was of providing 'thick description' (Geertz, 1973), where the 'voices, feelings, actions and meanings of interacting individuals are heard' (Denzin, 1989: 83). This aimed at understanding the meanings volunteers attached to their work within the particular context. The next section sets out the findings of the study.

## **Findings**

### ***Voluntary work organisation and building solidarity***

The work organisation and employment structure of RNLI is highly decentralised overall, with volunteer recruitment and selection the responsibility of local station management. A senior director expressed 'I am happy for [local stations] to be autonomous and self-

determining...it makes their team stronger' (Charles, 3 years). However, the central UK headquarters of paid divisional managerial staff also provided more formal codification and infrastructure through a crew handbook containing standardised job descriptions, role-specific requirements and competency frameworks for wider use (RNLI, 2017).

Although volunteers self-selected for duty, they were highly filtered by local management during the numerous tasks and training exercises which they were expected to perform. These included a twelve-month probationary period, minimum yearly attendance and training requirements, mentoring around alternative role profiles, fulfilling medical requirements, displaying particular behavioural and interpersonal competencies to mentors and assessors and upholding four core organisational values - being trustworthy, courageous, selfless and dependable (RNLI, 2017). Crew members stated approvingly that in probation 'the way you are taught everything is good', many expressing that they learned 'how' to be part of a team. Taken together, these activities both anticipated and built a sense of solidarity between those having come through the socialisation process. Echoing the sentiments of many others, a crew member remarked: 'we are like a band of brothers after that'.

This formal aspect of work organisation was intertwined with a dense web of social and kinship relations (O'Toole and Grey, 2016b). Lifeboating typically runs in families, with multiple members of the same family involved in stations. Whether blood-related or not, all respondents (paid and unpaid) emphasised being 'part of a family', 'a big lifeboat family', and it was clear that friendships and socialising together enhanced the forging of meaningful bonds. One mechanic emphasised: 'we socialise with each other outside of work...everyone would muck in together, have a pint together, everyone is good buddies' (Patrick, 18 years). A crew member said: 'You can feel the atmosphere when you go in to the station - there's cracking jokes, slagging, good-natured banter - that sense of family is embodied here in the station' (Conor, 14 years).

Furthermore, the operational lifeboat work is experienced offshore, at sea, and so there was very little back-up if the rescue turned in to a life-and-death situation. As one crew member detailed: ‘we are on our own out there and that’s that’ (Jack, 7 years). This sense of physical isolation gave rise to a highly distinctive and meaningful work identity as the sole social and organisational line of defence when a particular form of danger was encountered, namely out at sea. As Hugh put it: ‘Well that’s hard [knocks at floor], that’s soft and wet [indicates to sea] when you get into trouble here it’s somebody else [that will help you], when you get into trouble out there it’s us. That’s it’ (Crew Member, 7 years).

Structurally, the rational-legal foundations of the voluntary work organisation emanated from the UK headquarters, which instilled a sense of solidarity – ‘they [HQ] are there to help us’ – through organisational routines intended to guide actions, thoughts and feelings out at lifeboat stations. Training was a fundamental feature of volunteers’ experience of the local station and the formal RNLI organisation. Weekly training rituals were used to impart skills and techniques and to gauge the interest and commitment levels of volunteers and their capabilities for moving upwards to more specialised positions such as deputy coxswain or mechanic. As one Operations Manager put it: ‘See if they keep coming back, week after week after week, even in the dark winters’ (Brendan, 32 years).

Standard operating procedures (SOPs) were utilised extensively as a way of codifying expert knowledge and formed the basis of almost all training programmes in order to bestow predictability and reliability. Each task (for example setting up fire suppression equipment, leveraging in a stretcher, shutting off valves) was broken up into a numbered sequence of precise actions to be taken and who was to take them. This constant repetition of SOPs had a positive value judgement attached to it by coxswains, one mentioning: ‘Absolutely train to the SOP, we HAVE to’. The routines normalised their existence as a shared experience and a formal structural basis for solidarity. Regarding the importance of SOPs, a second coxswain

expressed: ‘You have to know that they [the crew] are able to protect you, otherwise you can’t ask them to do it’ (Peter, 17 years). These rituals were useful in facilitating mutual meaning-making in the hostile environments ultimately faced: ‘The systems they use are good, and they are beneficial to us...the training kicks in [out there at sea]’ (Mike, Second Mechanic, 10 years). Resultantly, the correct set-up and use of each piece of equipment on the boat was, as volunteers expressed it, ‘SOP-ed to the last’.

This institutionalised teamwork provided a formalised basis for solidaristic working. Job descriptions for all operational roles state that the candidate must ‘be a team player and be accepted by the rest of the crew’ (RNLI, 2019), and this was tested in competency-based training and assessment. In the empirical data, when asked by the researcher ‘what are the factors you need in place to effect a good rescue?’, references were made to ‘soundness of decision making’, ‘full confidence in your boat’ and ‘a little bit of luck’. All coxswains emphasised the importance of ‘good teamwork’.

The fact that the frontline work was unpaid volunteering also gave rise to a more intersubjective, organic sense of how those values would be more affectively and authentically put into practice:

Anything that money is involved in you lose values then. So I don’t think it should [be paid], because if you are a volunteer you are doing it with your heart, whereas if there is money involved...you know yourself. (Jack, Crew Member, 7 years)

The dangerous actualities of the physical working environment – wind, waves, swells, tides, darkness, rain, thunder, lightning, seasickness – also combined to create an unusual work setting. Crew stated how they ‘got thrown around the place’ on the boat, with some occasionally suffering severe seasickness. Volunteers were co-located in space and time in close proximity, experiencing weather conditions and circumstances together in a tight and



confined area, and, as one told us: ‘Sometimes it’s very frightening’. This marked out the work of the RNLI as distinctive in ways that linked highly formal volunteering and safety practices with a more contrasting, complementary set of affective and organic experiences on a boat at sea. At the same time, both these interrelated sources of solidarity in volunteering – predictable practices and unpredictable work – fed into wider intersubjective historical and community memories of the organisation, its purpose and emotionally charged experiences and recollections:

I remember years ago here there was a ship and it was too far away from this station to go out to but I still remember the radio operator on the ship and him saying ‘we’re going down we’re going down’ and I thought holy shit this is really happening! And nobody could get to him, that was really...I couldn’t believe that, it was just out of range of lifeboats [which were slower then]... I thought ‘Jesus is this reality?!’ (Colin, Second Mechanic, 21 years)

Colin’s quote illustrates the deep desire of the local community to organise for the purposes of help and providing a response in desperate times of need – ‘showing’ and ‘performing’ solidarity with those who need it. The next section examines how respondents enacted solidarity in the face of such danger out at sea.

### ***Encountering danger in edgework and enacting solidarity***

Respondents described a sense of unity in facing up to the sea as a shared danger and a force of nature that would show little respect for human activity and bodies, or the ‘edge’ between life and death associated with edgework (Lyng, 1990). One emphasised: ‘It’s all of us out there together’, while another revealed: ‘The sea doesn’t treat you different just because you’re on a lifeboat’ (Conor, Crew Member, 14 years). Indeed, respondents provided ample

evidence that their work was in fact dangerous, with work activities routinely undertaken that involved real possibilities of physical harm and psychological trauma: ‘There have been so many tragedies...we were searching for a fisherman and we all knew him, he was a local man, and that took its toll emotionally and psychologically on the lads’ (Robert, Crew Member, 8 years). Tragedy indeed ‘took its toll’ and many respondents spoke of having suffered post-traumatic stress disorder, with one station in particular having sought the services of a local doctor and counsellor to help their members after a particularly harrowing succession of boats capsizing and local drownings. A second coxswain detailed how ‘things went down...people went down’ after a rescue because ‘we had one of the lads on board and while he didn’t die on the lifeboat, he didn’t make it’ (Peter, 17 years).

Each lifeboat station had its own rituals and traditions for honouring past tragedies. One participant recounted: ‘Our boat capsized in 1997 and one of the lads was lost. Christmas Eve morning there’s always a mass to commemorate it’ (Alan, Second Coxswain, 15 years). Most stations go for ‘a few pints at the lifeboat fundraising day’ and speeches are made, which include both remembering their deceased and emphasising the bravery of the crew that helped.

However, it was not only the dark side of lifeboating that contributed to a building of solidarity in interpersonal relations. Successes and ‘good shouts’<sup>1</sup> were also important in generating a feeling of what was variously described as ‘togetherness’, ‘belongingness’ and ‘good spirit’. Comparable to the ‘saves’ or ‘good jobs’ of emergency ambulance crews (Granter et al., 2018), respondents emphasised the positive reactions and solidarity engendered by ‘good shouts’, as articulated here by Brendan:

When you see a crew coming back in after a dirty night and a dirty shout<sup>2</sup>  
and two or three or four or five people on a boat after being saved by that

crew, that's the reason we are all here, that's the difference it all makes

(Operations Manager, 32 years).

Another crew member recounted how there would be a 'buzz' at the station in the weeks after a major successful rescue, with people in 'good form...high like'. Alongside the more informal methods of honouring crew, the formal organisation issues medals for gallantry and RNLI members are frequently recipients of Queen's honours.

In solidarity research and theorisation, there is often an 'other' associated with danger or threat, which a group shows solidarity 'against', as a common enemy or adversary (Oosterlynck et al., 2016; Walhof, 2006). In the case of RNLI rescue crews, the other was the sea or natural environment against which the crews had to undertake their dangerous work together. Rather than encounters with danger that might provoke panic, fear and despair, the RNLI crews approached danger with socially meaningful appraisals: 'You've got to trust each other, pull together, work as a team' (Mike, Second Mechanic, 10 years), and situational awareness: 'An eye to the sea at all times'. In this way, crews drew on common routines and experiences to enact solidarity in battling to achieve their goals. One crew member explained: 'When you are out there [at sea] you are relying on who is out there...you are watching out for him and he is watching out for you. Everyone looks after each other'. (Karl, Crew Member, 6 years)

Danger was also linked to solidarity through the institutional and historical aspects of the RNLI organisation and the communities in which it operated, contributing to an expansive and robust solidarity beyond the immediate work groups on boats. The RNLI was described by respondents as a 'specialised community' brought together by a social purpose and values beyond earning money. Longstanding ties in the organisation were associated with a deepening of social standing and status in a social group prepared to triumph over danger together. As one second coxswain articulated 'we're all in it for the same thing, to save lives

at sea' (Alan, 15 years). The next section examines how volunteers achieve and experience this collectively.

### ***Experiencing meaningful solidarity together***

The distinctive and rather extraordinary commitment of RNLI workers to each other and to the aims of the institution were evidenced in the informal moral code: 'We have a saying - 'drown you may, but go you must' (Fergus, Mechanic, 18 years). As close-knit groups, rescue volunteer crews were able to accomplish solidarity by facing danger together as a team and not alone. Shared organisational and experiential understandings of solidarity were central to interactions in which actors constructed their identification with meaningful work and entrenched their commitment to each other. One mechanic articulated it thus: 'We have got to be there to protect other people...we are there to save somebody's life!' (Patrick, 18 years). The language respondents used to describe the preparedness to help one another out of danger was *performative* toward constituting or 'doing' solidarity – a way of sincerely enacting habits, beliefs and social actions needed to sustain it (Gond et al., 2016):

Jesus the one thing we have here is that if you fall over the side, go over the side, jump over the side - somebody will be right after you. No matter what condition you are in, what speed you are going at, if you go in someone will be with you immediately. If they spot you they will be over [the side of the lifeboat] with you and that's the rule we have.

(Ryan, Mechanic, 13 years)

This was an unofficial rule, forged during training and socialisation, presented by respondents as a way of unconditionally demonstrating trust and solidarity towards their teammates. Consequences for violation of this norm included the risk of being snubbed for future selection on shouts.

Coupled with the dangerous work environment in which these crucial, life-or-death functions were performed, a strong emphasis was placed on values, beliefs and norms that engendered high levels of interpersonal solidarity, or as one Operations Manager put it: ‘These guys are so tight...they have great respect for each other. They know that one day, their life might depend on their fellow crewman’. (Steven, 27 years)

A formally reinforced moral code, as well as volunteers’ affective commitment to the boat, the station and each other shaped their thoughts, feelings and actions. Notably, solidarity did not just begin and end at local station level, but was also evident across stations. Crews frequently joined the rescue efforts of neighbouring stations to give other crews a break from protracted missions. Respondents were keen to stress that bonds of solidarity and mutual support did not arise solely out of utilitarian necessity, but from a bond deeper than instrumentality. This willingness to work together to overcome fear was evident throughout respondents’ accounts. One coxswain disclosed: ‘For any man to think he can do it on his own...he is off his head if he thinks that’ (David, 32 years). The necessary mastery and control of the edgework was related to the moral purpose of rescue and the intrinsic value of safeguarding human life from danger (Douglas, 2003). The danger acted as a call to an organisation responsive at a moment’s notice, reinforced by both general structural practices of work organisation and the specific circumstances of a rescue call.

A general common interest of volunteer status and a formally shared moral purpose brought about trust and togetherness. Equally, more organic, circumstantial and experiential knowledge of rescues and tragedies, such as going through hardships together, brought about emotional connection. As a crew member articulated: ‘Bringing bodies back to the station...everyone is affected’. Being physically together in space and time in the tight confines of a boat ‘getting bounced around the place’ whilst also being offshore: ‘A team out

on our own' were very meaningful to volunteers and greatly influenced the nature of their social relations.

In sum, this dangerous and prosocial edgework at the RNLI acted as a highly meaningful basis for constructing a strong, embodied and active form of solidarity, continually reinforced by performing the procedures and adhering to the values of safety and shared responsibility, needed for facing and overcoming dangers together.

## **Discussion and conclusion**

The study gives a nuanced account of the nature of solidarity among volunteers who experience dangerous work together, and findings underpin a framework that links the previously unconnected phenomena of dangerous work activities, volunteering, edgework and solidarity. Returning to the study's contributions the findings show how the lived experience and work organisation of social norms and obligations construct and (re)produce a distinct form of solidarity for volunteers. Indeed, the study contributes to literatures on work and employment by linking volunteering work to solidarity, dangerous work to solidarity and meaningful work to solidarity. Together, these conditions are constitutive of a distinctive form of work solidarity and open a novel conceptual space around volunteering and dangerous work. The study also demonstrates how bonding in work activity that is simultaneously dangerous and voluntary is reinforced by structural aspects of work organisation, such as SOP's and training rituals that foster solidarity. Solidarity is shown to be generated through key sources of meaning combined; both formal and institutional volunteering practices and ties, as well as more informal shared experiences on lifeboats and specific rescues in situ.

The RNLI shows how workers draw meaning from their work to inform and reinforce a sense of solidarity. Edgework conditions socialise workers to interpret danger in ways meaningful to them, and the study illustrates how this can inform and cultivate ongoing accomplishments of solidarity. Danger, local volunteering and close-quartered lifeboat rescue experiences produce these particular social relations, creating social resources around courageous, resilient actions and a positive social thriving in adversity (O'Leary, 1998).

Overall, the findings from this empirical study extend existing, longstanding theorisations of solidarity (Wilde, 2007). Solidarity arises organically and mechanically from various unities and divisions of labour across diverse groups (Starkey, 1992). However, there has been less consideration given to different bases and sources of this solidarity (e.g. Kapeller and Wolkenstein, 2013). The current study differentiates a strong form of solidarity where reciprocity, unity and loyalty are (re)produced through volunteering work organisation and coordinated edgework on lifeboats, experienced as meaningful in putting a shared moral purpose into practice. Every time they go out to sea on a rescue, the workers are pledging to 'have each other's backs' no matter how demanding work becomes, both as socialised organisational members and as workers as a team at sea on a rescue mission.

The data show that work conducted in a dangerous environment, or at the 'edge' between life and death, plays a significant and transformative role in enacting the kind of deep, active and embodied solidarity observed at the RNLI. The removal of the wage-labour relationship and the historical and community embeddedness of the work differentiates this group of voluntary workers from paid public or private sector staff, who typically encounter danger under more hierarchical and controlled organisational and managerial conditions (e.g. Granter et al., 2018). The RNLI experience of working in these dangerous and testing conditions bonds volunteers together and increases levels of solidarity, togetherness, and we-ness

(Kanter, 1968); both within rescue groups and across the rest of the organisation. The solidarity fostered leads to the building of interpersonal bonds that organise and structure groups in highly supportive ways, serving as ‘a fundamental means of dealing psychologically with risks that could paralyse action or lead to dread and anxiety’ (Giddens, 1991: 3).

Purposefully volunteering to engage with danger in work activity offers an alternative to individualistic approaches to risk, although further research is needed to investigate the varying social foundations and dimensions of danger as experienced in different work situations. In the volunteering work studied here, the dual prospect of saving lives while dealing with the possibility of losing one’s own life is generative of profound social meaningfulness for constituting solidarity. While there is a growing interest in extreme and challenging work (Bamberger and Pratt, 2010; Granter et al., 2015), very few other occupations have to deal with life-and-death, do-or-die dilemmas on an unpaid, regular basis. Other notable cases involving both danger and volunteering include mountain rescue work (e.g. Nichols et al., 2014) and charitable aid work in conflict zones (Gerde and Michaelson, 2016), but these contexts are under-represented in work and employment literature. The RNLI shows evidence of longstanding historical and community bonds constitutive of work solidarity, as well as volunteering and rescue dimensions of work organised across a decentralised but highly embedded structure of lifeboat stations and crews. The setting of the current study is therefore related to, but distinct from, other research on meaningful experiences underlying dangerous activities.

Future research should continue to investigate relationships between volunteering, dangerous work and meaningful bonds of solidarity in other settings, and consider how solidarity is constituted through formal sources in employment structures and organic sources in the experiences and circumstances of purposeful work activities in situ. Workers are likely



to experience danger and solidarity in various ways 'on the front line' in particular contexts (Taylor et al., 2009). One limitation of the current study is that it considers a form of solidarity that is relatively voluntary, prosocial and proactive in nature. However, other 'showings' of solidarity should be explored to broaden and deepen understandings of the concept. Solidarity can take more transitory, less active forms (e.g. signing a petition) or be characterised by more overt patterns of conflict and resistance (e.g. refusing to cross a strike picket line). Extending the current study, with danger or edgework involved in the bonds uniting workers facing challenging and disordered conditions, solidarity may take on further affective, gendered and/or embodied dimensions to its performance (Vachhani and Pullen, 2018; Wolkowitz, 2002). Future research could also benefit from examining solidarity where unifying bonds are unstable or liable to break down. Where there are diverse coalitions or factions that struggle to construct a sense of shared purpose, this might amplify or exacerbate how forms of employment and intense experiences unfold.

In conclusion, this article argues that the formal practices and work organisation of a distinctive volunteering organisation, the RNLI, combine with more informal experiences on lifeboats at sea as two complementary sources for constituting a strong solidarity among workers. In addition, the dangerous and morally meaningful and purposeful aspects of lifeboat rescue work – usefully described as a distinctive form of edgework – provide a further layer for reinforcing and sustaining solidarity. Lifeboat crews voluntarily and repeatedly work without pay to overcome danger to others, and indeed themselves, at the edge between life and death. This study demonstrates how solidarity can be a social process underpinned by the webs of meaning required for highly coordinated action. In this form, solidarity can provide and mobilise necessary social resources for workers to thrive in adversity and overcome threats to their own and others' safety and well-being.

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## Notes

1. A ‘good shout’ is one where the rescue goes to plan and there is a successful outcome.
2. A ‘dirty shout’ is one where challenging and disruptive weather conditions make operational conditions very difficult.

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